The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11 as the Law and the Prophets: A Full Preterist Defense of Personified Covenantal Testimony

Introduction: The First-Century Covenantal Context

The identity of the "two witnesses" in Revelation 11:3-13 represents one of the most persistent interpretive cruxes in biblical literature.[1] While traditional literalist paradigms focus on specific historical individuals (such as Moses and Elijah or Enoch and Elijah) appearing in a distant future tribulation [1], a cohesive hermeneutical alternative identifies these figures as the personified representatives of "the Law and the Prophets"—the dual covenantal testaments of God.[1] This identification posits that the witnesses are not merely physical manuscripts on parchment, but the active, personified message of God's covenantal requirements and prophetic warnings.[2]

From a strict full preterist perspective, the entire book of Revelation, including the narrative of the Two Witnesses, found its absolute consummation in the events of the first-century Roman-Jewish War (AD 66-73), culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70. Within this eschatological framework, the "great city" is explicitly defined as earthly Jerusalem, which is "spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified" (Revelation 11:8). The 1,260 days (or 42 months / 3.5 years) represent the literal, highly volatile period of covenantal warning and Roman military siege immediately preceding the temple's destruction. This analysis demonstrates that the personified testament model remains a highly plausible and hermeneutically superior explanation of the Johannine text when evaluated through first-century historical-critical realizations.[3]

Thesis I: The Law and the Prophets as a Living Forensic Persona

The case for the Two Witnesses as the personified Law and Prophets is rooted in the biblical-theological conception of the Word of God as an active, living, and judging entity.[2] This argument is sustained through five primary exegetical pillars: canonical hendiadys, forensic necessity, typological mimicry, the supply of divine light, and the expansion of anthropomorphic symbolism.[2]

1. Canonical Hendiadys and First-Century Shorthand

In the linguistic environment of first-century Judaism and the early Church, the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" served as standard shorthand for the entirety of God's revelation (Torah and Nevi'im).[4] Jesus and His apostles consistently used this phrasing to summarize the ethical and theological heart of God's covenantal revelation (Matthew 5:17; 7:12; Luke 16:16; Romans

3:21).[2]

The following table outlines the function of this shorthand in the first-century context [2]:

| NT Reference | Context of "The Law and the Prophets" | Function of the Phrase | | Matthew 5:17 | Sermon on the Mount | Affirmation of fulfillment rather than abolition | | Matthew 7:12 | The Golden Rule | Ethical summation of the entire biblical corpus | | Luke 16:16 | Transition of Eras | Marking the period before the proclamation of the Kingdom | | Luke 24:44 | Post-Resurrection Instruction | The unified testimony pointing to Christ's mission | | Romans 3:21 | Justification by Faith | The forensic witness to the righteousness of God |

In Revelation 11, the introduction of "my two witnesses" immediately follows the eating of the "little scroll" in chapter 10, indicating that the witnesses are the external, prophetic manifestation of that consumed Word.[2] They represent the "volume of the book" that testifies to divine authority and world judgment.[2]

2. Forensic Necessity: The Legal Function of the Two

The designation of the witnesses as "two" is fundamentally rooted in the judicial statutes of the Torah (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15), which mandate that a legal matter must be established by the testimony of at least two witnesses to carry a death sentence.[1] In God's covenant lawsuit against apostate Jerusalem, the Law serves as a permanent "witness against" the people for covenantal violations (Deuteronomy 31:26), while the Prophets serve as witnesses to God's warnings and the impending reality of judgment.[2] Standing "before the Lord of the earth," they provide the necessary legal evidence to prosecute the city's rebellion in the cosmic courtroom.[2]

3. Typological Mimicry: The Power of the Word

The identity is further evidenced by the signs the witnesses perform, which mirror the quintessential ministries of Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets).[3] They shut the sky to prevent rain (recalling Elijah's 3.5-year drought in 1 Kings 17:1) and turn waters to blood and strike the earth with plagues (recalling Moses in Exodus 7-12).[1] The "fire proceeding out of their mouth" to devour their enemies represents the judging power of the spoken Word.[2] As Yahweh declared to Jeremiah, "I will make my words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them" (Jeremiah 5:14).

4. Zechariah 4 and the Supply of Divine Light

Revelation 11:4 identifies the witnesses as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands," a direct citation of Zechariah 4:2-14.[2] In Zechariah's vision, the two olive trees provide a perpetual supply of oil to the lampstand.[2] Since the "lampstands" in Revelation represent the "churches" (Revelation 1:20), the Law and the Prophets function as the olive trees—the external, divine source of Truth and Spirit that allows the Church's light to be maintained.[4]

5. Anthropomorphic Personification of the Divine Message

There is extensive biblical precedent for anthropomorphizing abstract concepts or divine

messages.[2] Truth is personified in Isaiah 59:14 as having "fallen in the street" and being unable to "enter".[2] The Word of God is defined as "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12).[2] Paul personifies the Law as having "dominion" as long as it "lives" (Romans 7:1) and describes "the Law and the Prophets" as active witness-bearers (Romans 3:21).[2] Furthermore, Jewish rabbinic traditions present the Torah as possessing its own living structure, given a "voice" and "limbs" to execute final judgment.[2]

Thesis II: Exegetical Defense Against Traditional Objections

While the personification of a message offers symbolic symmetry, critics have raised several narrative and lexical objections to this interpretation.[2] Below, these objections are systematically answered using the internal grammar of the Greek text, Semitic legal conventions, and first-century historical-critical realizations.[3]

1. Rebuttal to Lexical Barriers (Martys vs. Martyrion)

Critics contend that *martys* (Revelation 11:3) is strictly reserved for sentient human persons, while a message must be designated as a *martyrion* (a piece of evidence).[6] However, in the Septuagint and broader Jewish legal sphere, the functional definition of a witness is not confined to biological human beings.[1]

In Genesis 31:47, when Jacob and Laban erect a heap of stones to seal their covenant, Laban names the monument *Jegar-sahadutha* (Aramaic), while Jacob names it *Galeed* (Hebrew). The Septuagint translates this transaction by stating that Jacob called the stone heap *bounos martys* ("the hill is witness"), utilizing the masculine, personal noun *martys* for an inanimate pile of rocks.

Similarly, in Joshua 24:27, Joshua sets up a large stone and declares that "this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord". The Septuagint translates this by adding that the stone "shall be among you to be a witness at the last day (*ep' eschatōn*)".[7] In Psalm 89:37, the moon is designated as "the faithful witness in the sky" (*ho martys en ouranō pistos*).[8] If the Septuagint can designate a pile of stones and the moon as a *martys* due to their enduring testimony to God's covenant, there is no lexical barrier preventing John from using *martys* to represent the personified Law and Prophets.[8]

Furthermore, the Johannine corpus itself contains grammatical gender solecisms designed to personify non-human elements. In 1 John 5:7-8, three neuter nouns—the Spirit (*to pneuma*), the water (*to hydōr*), and the blood (*to haima*)—are modified by the masculine plural present participle *hoi martyrountes* ("the [masculine] ones bearing witness"). This demonstrates a deliberate Johannine pattern where conceptual, inanimate elements are grammatically personified as active witness-bearers (*martys*).

2. Rebuttal to Biological Physicality (Ptōma and Tomb Refusal)

Critics point to the physical descriptions of the witnesses' "corpse" (*ptōma*), refusal of burial in a "tomb" (*mnēma*), and "standing on their feet" as requiring biological human agents.[6] However,

this overlooks a striking grammatical feature of the Greek text: in Revelation 11:8-9, the original manuscripts use the singular noun *to ptōma* ("their corpse [singular]") to refer to the "two" witnesses, along with the singular "mouth" (*stomatos*) in v. 5.[9] This distributive singular indicates that the "two" witnesses are grammatically and conceptually a single, unified entity—the unified body of Covenant Scripture—rather than separate human bodies.[10]

The "resurrection" imagery of standing on their feet (Revelation 11:11) is a direct literary allusion to the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:10. In Ezekiel's vision, the physical reanimation of the bones does not represent a literal biological resurrection of individual human corpses; Yahweh explicitly defines the vision as a corporate, national metaphor for "the whole house of Israel" and their national and spiritual restoration.[11]

Similarly, the refusal of the "tomb" (*mnēma*) represents Jerusalem's attempt to keep the divine message exposed to public mockery in the streets.[5] In Jewish culture, leaving a body unburied was the ultimate expression of shame.[2] In a preterist framework, the refusal of burial metaphorically depicts the first-century temple elite's attempt to deny the Scriptures an honorable preservation, keeping the prophetic warnings exposed to public shame rather than allowing them to be respectfully put out of sight.[5]

3. Rebuttal to Volition and Sackcloth

The assertion that volition ("as they wish") and the wearing of "sackcloth" restrict the witnesses to human beings is answered by the active, self-executing nature of the Word in Jewish theology.[13] The Word of God is never viewed as static data, but as an active, living force (Hebrews 4:12).[2] Endowed with its own dynamic volition, the Word executes judgment automatically; the "will" of the witnesses to strike the earth is the personified representation of the sovereign will of the divine Author, operating through the warnings of the Prophets and the requirements of the Law.[14]

The wearing of "sackcloth" (Revelation 11:3) is a powerful symbol of mourning and repentance.[15] In Jewish rabbinic and midrashic tradition, during times of severe national apostasy, the Torah itself is frequently personified as weeping, mourning, and wearing sackcloth over Israel's sins.[17] The garment is not a biological necessity but a literary marker of the message's historical state: it is a message of warning and lamentation delivered to a hostile world.[15]

4. Rebuttal to the Word vs. Witness Distinction

Critics claim that John maintains a strict theological distinction between the "Word of God" (*Logos*) and the "Witnesses" (*Martys*), and that identifying the witnesses as the Law and Prophets collapses this framework.[2] However, this ignores the central Johannine synthesis, where the boundary between message (*Logos*) and messenger (*Martys*) is intentionally dissolved.[19]

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the ultimate pre-existent *Logos* made flesh (John 1:1, 14).[19] Yet, in Revelation, Jesus is explicitly designated as "the faithful witness" (*ho martys ho pistos*) (Revelation 1:5; 3:14).[19] Jesus perfectly embodies both the Word and the Witness.[19] The witnesses represent the corporate and conceptual proclamation of this divine *Logos* through the Old and New Testaments, maintaining absolute theological consistency.[6]

5. Rebuttal to the "Symbol of Symbols" Fallacy

The argument that identifying the two witnesses as "two olive trees and two lampstands" creates a hermeneutical fallacy of "symbols of symbols" is a misunderstanding of Jewish apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic writing is structurally defined by multi-layered, nested, and recapitulating metaphors.[21] For example, in Revelation 17:9-10, the "seven heads" are explicitly defined as "seven hills" *and* "seven kings".[23] This is a direct canonical example of nested, multi-tiered symbolism where one symbol (heads) points to another symbol (hills), which in turn points to an external political reality (kings).[23]

In Zechariah 4, the olive trees represent "anointed ones" supplying the lampstand.[1] In Revelation, the olive trees (the Law and the Prophets) supply the oil of divine truth, allowing the lampstands (the churches) to maintain their light in a dark world.[4]

Reframed Clinical Conclusion: A Consistent Full Preterist Resolution

The traditional literalist claim that the narrative structure of Revelation 11—focusing on localized torment, volition, and biological reanimation—restricts the text to individual human agents is overly restrictive.[6] Under a rigorous, consistent full preterist framework, these narrative details are fully realized in the first-century destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The "great city" is explicitly earthly Jerusalem, which had rejected the Messiah and was "spiritually called Sodom and Egypt". The 1,260 days represent the literal period of tribulation and Roman siege during the Jewish War (AD 67-70). During this time, the Law and the Prophets actively "tormented" the apostate Jewish leadership by prosecuting their covenantal rebellion and announcing the imminent curses of Deuteronomy 28.[24]

The "slaying" of the witnesses by the "beast from the abyss" (representing the Roman military machine in collusion with the corrupt temple elite) signifies the final, systematic silencing of covenantal truth in Jerusalem, culminating in the martyrdom of the last Old Covenant prophets and the apostolic witnesses.[24] For three-and-a-half "days" (representing the brief, intense height of the siege), the apostate leadership rejoiced, believing they had silenced the "torment" of divine indictment.

However, their "resurrection" and "ascension" represent the supreme covenantal vindication of the Word of God in the catastrophic fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. When the Temple fell and the Old Covenant system was terminated, the warnings, curses, and prophecies of Moses and the Prophets were fully and literally executed before the eyes of their enemies. The personified Testaments were raised to a position of ultimate authority and vindication, "ascending to heaven" in triumph as the cosmic courtroom ruled in favor of the martyrs. The Law and the Prophets were not silenced; they were vindicated by the breath of the living God and established forever as the unchanging testimony of God's truth.

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